

## Spirituality in Japan and A Few Cases/Narratives

**Misa Tsuruta\***

*Psychotherapist at Azabudai Counseling Center, Japan*

**\*Corresponding Author:** Misa Tsuruta, Psychotherapist at Azabudai Counseling Center, Japan.

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### Abstract

Despite the importance of the role it plays in human suffering, spirituality has been warded off in psychiatry because it is not scientific. In recent years, however, there are attempts to reconsider spirituality and integrate it into psychiatric practices. In this article, spirituality in Japan is briefly overviewed, followed by a few examples where spiritual or unscientific elements had significance in clinical or suffering processes. The first is a case of a grade school girl who was haunted by ghosts and whose performance was undermined by the fear. The second is a case of a woman who was a survivor of domestic violence and who overused fortune-telling services in conjunction with counseling. Lastly, the third is a narrative of a woman who survived the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011. Her fiancé was lost in the middle of the massive tsunami, but a year later she encountered his “ghost” which marked the end of a phase in her suffering. Cultural diversity is richer than expected even within a single country. By taking spiritual elements into account psychiatry can become a more integral discipline.

**Keywords:** *Spirituality; Japan; Psychiatry*

### Introduction

Psychiatry attempts to formulate a case drawing on complex personal, familial, and social backgrounds of the individual, yet spirituality is a much neglected element in mental health. Perhaps ever since the human society was formed, human sufferings have been associated with spirituality. People requested help to those beings that they consider possess higher and/or supernatural power to intervene. For example, Jewish people who suffered the Diaspora had to survive among the different; at the time of racial crisis their mystic tradition, the Kabbalah gained more significance in their life [1].

Despite this association, modern psychology/psychiatry as a division of science/medicine did not take spirituality into account because it was not considered scientific. For example, in the United Kingdom, spirituality/ religion was not paid academic attention before 1970s when more Christian practitioners were in the field of psychiatry [2].

In this paper, the author would like to first discuss a brief overview of Japanese spirituality and then move onto the discussion of three different “cases” that encompass spiritual elements in them one way or another. Among the three, the third one is not exactly a clinical case, but a narrative by a victim of Great East Japan Earthquake that took place in 2011. The author did not collect the narrative, but it is derived from a book by a journalist? [3] who collected similar narratives that had to do with spirituality and otherworldliness after the disaster.

The rest two are clinical cases that the author handled. One is a short-term treatment of a 3<sup>rd</sup> grader girl with fear of ghosts; and the other is a beginning of a case of a woman with a history of eating disorder who was a victim of domestic violence and excessively used divination and other methods in order to cope with her ailment.

### Characteristics of Japanese spirituality

Perhaps one of the biggest characteristics of Japanese spirituality is that it is not governed or deeply influenced by major monotheism such as Christianity or Islam, while there are Christians and Muslims in contemporary Japan. Christianity was brought to Japan in mid-16<sup>th</sup> Century by a Portuguese missionary Francisco de Xavier, rapidly gathered many believers. However, only about a half century later, in 1614, Christianity was officially banned and believers were subject to persecution by the government. It was only after the establishment of the modern government in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century that believers regained their freedom to worship.

What was indigenous in Japan is a rather unorganized religion that later developed into Shintoism. It is polytheism where it is claimed that there are 8 million gods or deities ("8 million" just refers to "so many"). Natural objects and places such as rocks, trees, and mountains have become the objects of worship. This animistic tendency has not been fundamentally changed in Japan; even to a less degree than before, people tend to believe in the power of natural objects and gods that are associated with them.

Christianity arrived late in Japan perhaps because of its geographical isolation as an island and its location set in the Far East, but Buddhism arrived when the ancient Japanese government was still being formed, in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century. Ancient Japanese people were quickly enchanted by gilded Buddhist statues brought by Korean people [4]. Within a few decades temples were constructed in the center of Japan; Buddhism was utilized to enhance the power of the imperial family.

Like in other countries where it was (propagated) Buddhism was blended into the local religion, in this case Shintoism. Shintoism or Shinto only got its formal name only being threatened by the arrival of Buddhism. Or perhaps more precisely Buddhism and Shintoism did not blend so indistinctively; rather, both parties cooperated or antagonized according to the contemporary political and cultural situations. Buddhism was not brought to Japan at once either; including most prominent Buddhist figures such as Kukai and Saicho, numerous priests and masters brought various schools of Buddhism to Japan like repeated waves, stimulating formation of new schools and sects within Japan [5].

Perhaps up to the top-down modernization/westernization by the Meiji Restoration (1868) when Japan opened itself to the influences of foreign cultures after about 2-century of its isolation policy, Buddhism had realistic influences on daily life of many ordinary people within Japan. For example, they might have adhered to almost vegetarian diet, avoiding eating any creatures that had four legs. Certainly, abrupt import and prioritization of western cultures caught huge confusion in Japanese culture and people. The final blow was the defeat of the Pacific War in 1945 that marked one end of the second World War. Emperor Showa, who was formerly worshiped as "living god" (arahitogami) was turned into just a human being. The dangerous religion of Shintoism that provided the country with power was separated from political institutions. At the same time, freedom of religious belief and worship was warranted by the Constitution [5].

It may not be so far-reaching to say that these two major events that are about 3 quarters of century apart from each other seriously undermined the sense of continuity of spirituality among Japanese. Temples and shrines, as well as other religious organization are alive and active in contemporary Japan, yet most Japanese children do not receive any comprehensive religious education and experiences. Perhaps one of the remote causes of the horrendous terrorist attacks on the Tokyo subway system in 1995, planned and carried out by members of a new religious cult Om Shinri-kyo, may be attributed to cultural and historical backgrounds described above.

While it might sound too conclusive, the three cases depicted below are more or less influenced by the lack of comprehensive theories of suffering and healing offered by existing religious and spiritual systems in Japan. On the other hand, it seems that psychology as an imported discipline does not appeal to Japanese people who are normally not so comfortable in sharing personal, intimate, or familial details to strangers such as counselors, therapists, or psychiatrists.

Of course, the author is not claiming that believing in one of the existing, conventional religions can automatically reduce psychological distress and heal psychological ailments. Still, having a "spiritual backbone" can be a support for many, and lacking one can make people more vulnerable.

### **A girl haunted by ghosts**

N, 9-year-old girl, was brought to an office of the company the author then worked for by her mother in the middle of summer. Notably, the particular office was not set up for child treatment; it was an ordinary office rather designed for adult users. The restriction of the space inevitably put some constraints on our work, though the client's certain capacities (e.g. to draw, to make stories) helped enormously in the clinical process.

Altogether we met for 7 sessions and one initial parental consultation. According to her mother, she was distractive, lacking concentration, and does not learn certain tasks very well. The results of her WISC administered by another psychologist prior to the treatment entailed some discrepancies among scores but did not point to any diagnosable developmental disorders.

N was the younger of the two daughters and the mother was obviously favoring the older daughter who was more adaptive, or overly adapted. As an attempt to listen to N's story and find potential causes of her anxiety that contributed to decreased concentration, the author was astonished by her narratives that included ghosts. In fact, it sounded that ghosts were everywhere; at school, in the neighborhood, and at home. At school, parents organized a haunted house (which is relatively a common practice) to "entertain" children yet left her uneasy; there was a park called "hanging park" because somebody committed or attempted suicide there; and at home, her mother suggested some existence behind her. Essentially N was haunted by many of these occasions.

Since she liked drawing, we drew jointly; for example, first the author drew a figure, then she added some patterns or decorations to it, etc. This developed into her "final project" of extensive comic.

The author did not intend to terminate but her parents seemed to have various reasons to do so, including financial. Seeing a psychology professional is still considered stigmatizing in Japan, so perhaps they thought that it would be better discourage their daughter from building further, long-term relationship with one.

N told the author that one day, her mother and she were watching TV. An incident where a child was kidnapped and then discarded in the mountain area was broadcast. Her mother warned her not to go into such an area. This also she internalized in an anxiety-provoking way given the afore mentioned basis of the formation of her world view. She drew lengthy comic of her version of this story. The girl was away from home, got lost in the mountains, and unable to get help and/or gain access to her mother. Internally she sounded lost and unable to contact the mother, though she was able to put this internal reality into perspective by constructing this comic. Indeed, the author learned that the client was called the "creative one" at home, though her qualities seemed not to be enough appreciated by her parents.

Toward the end of the treatment, her mother was able to obtain a new pair of glasses for her to correct her astigmatism and claimed that her concentration was improved because of the improved vision. Internal realities are less "visible" or obvious to those who are not particularly psychological-minded.

### **A woman who was misguided to a fortune teller**

In contemporary Japan, many people, particularly young people can rely on various forms of divination to know good luck/bad luck of their careers and relationships, romantic relationships in particular. Many go to the shrine and draw "omikujii," a Shinto version of lucky draw, or turn pages of a magazine to see how lucky their month/week might be according to Western or other forms of astrology. Yet, perhaps the portion of people who turn to any forms of divination regularly, especially when services are rendered with fees, must be much smaller. Frequent users can develop addiction to such fortune telling.

O, a 38-year-old woman, was the oldest daughter of a successful doctor who owned a clinic in her town. However, her father directed violence to his wife and daughters. O grew up to be a perfectionist, studied hard to be the top at high school in order to distract herself from psychological pains. Because she was studying so hard, her mother suggested that she find solace in Takaraduka, a very popular all women musical theater in Japan. This also provided an avenue for her to spend and unusually devote to later.

Her domineering father was not only violent but also unreasonable and ordering. At her college age, he ordered her not to come home before 10pm, to come home after drinking, etc. Subsequently she developed eating problems, unable to eat. She was endowed with above-average intelligence yet as a young woman at work she suffered stress mostly coming from interpersonal contacts. She had to quit her job because of eating problems.

She sought treatment for her eating problems. In her early 20s she was hospitalized twice; after discharge she started to work with a counselor; with a few changes, she settled in a treatment with a male counselor. However, he did not handle her love transference very well; eventually, he unilaterally terminated the treatment. She turned her passion to a star of Takaraduka, as well as started to see another female counselor. This counselor suggested that she use phone fortune-telling to deal with day-to-day stress. The combination of phone fortune-teller and Takaraduka left her hugely indebted though she was able to afford therapy because of her wealthy family. Despite the duration of her treatment, inadequate and unethical treatment provided by former treaters kept her style as blaming, angry, passive, and suspicious.

### **An earthquake survivor who encountered her lost fiancé**

The woman, a survivor of Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011, told Udagawa [3] that during the summer before the earthquake, she was engaged, preparing for and looking forward to her wedding scheduled several months later. On the day, March 11, she was home; when the earthquake hit, her fiancé came to her to help her run. They ran hand in hand, were engulfed by the tsunami, and when she knew where she was, he was gone.

Desperate, she embarked on a search for her lost fiancé. She visited a few shelters in vain. A year passed and on March 11 she was planning to attend a commemorative event. Before going to the venue, she needed to withdraw money at an automatic teller machine. There, unexpectedly, she found a long line of people. After a while she realized that these people were wet; when it was her turn, her lost fiancé came out of the booth. He patted on her shoulder and told her to work hard for the restoration of the town.

Now she realized that these people were ghosts, dead. Somehow it seemed that these people needed to withdraw money in order to help the townspeople. She burst into tears and fell on the ground. A Buddhist priest happened to pass by, instantly sensed what happened her. He helped her up and go to the commemoration venue.

Can it be called an illusion, a hallucinatory experience, or dissociative experience? Or confabulation? Dissociative experiences such as seeing the deceased in front of a store that s/he frequented before death have been reported, largely considered an experience within normal range. Perhaps our visual system is capable of replay what we are used to seeing. However, encountering the deceased lover, having conversation and being touched does not seem to be contained in that 'normal dissociative experience.

Similar ghostly or mysterious stories have been recounted at various places and by people affected by the Earthquake in 2011, which makes this particular story a little less unusual. Taxi drivers have reported that they had had 'ghost customers' who rode on their vehicle and disappeared, or asked him to drive to a particular point [3]. The number of stories seems too many to be warded off as "just an illusion" or "perhaps they are crazy."

What lies behind these narratives might be the particular culture in Tohoku region. Usually we tend to call all regions within Japan as "Japanese" and oversimplify the rich variety of cultures within the country. In the contemporary society, most people speak standard Japanese thanks to modern education and the media. At the same time, there are disappearing dialects that are spoken only by the elderly in the particular areas. While most people benefit from modern medicine, in Amami and Okinawa Islands traditional shamans, Yuta, are treasured by people who believe in their healing power [6,7].

### **Summary**

As far as psychology/psychiatry deals with human sufferings, it cannot ignore the significance of spirituality in human life. In this paper, the author briefly introduced Japanese spirituality and described and discussed a few examples that she encountered in Japan within

the past several years. There is a complex web of belief systems that are not simply explained by traditional “major” religions such as Christianity, Islam, or Buddhism. Bottom line is that in clinical practice, practitioners cannot assume that the client operates under the “same” belief system when it comes to religion and spirituality. Thus, practitioners should be willing to carefully explore and examine the dimensions of belief system of each client. For example, Sims and Cook [2] suggest that clinicians take “spiritual history” as part of the intake procedure. Such a procedure and related questions would give the client an opportunity to speak up from his/her spiritual self and would contribute a lot to the subsequent clinical process.

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